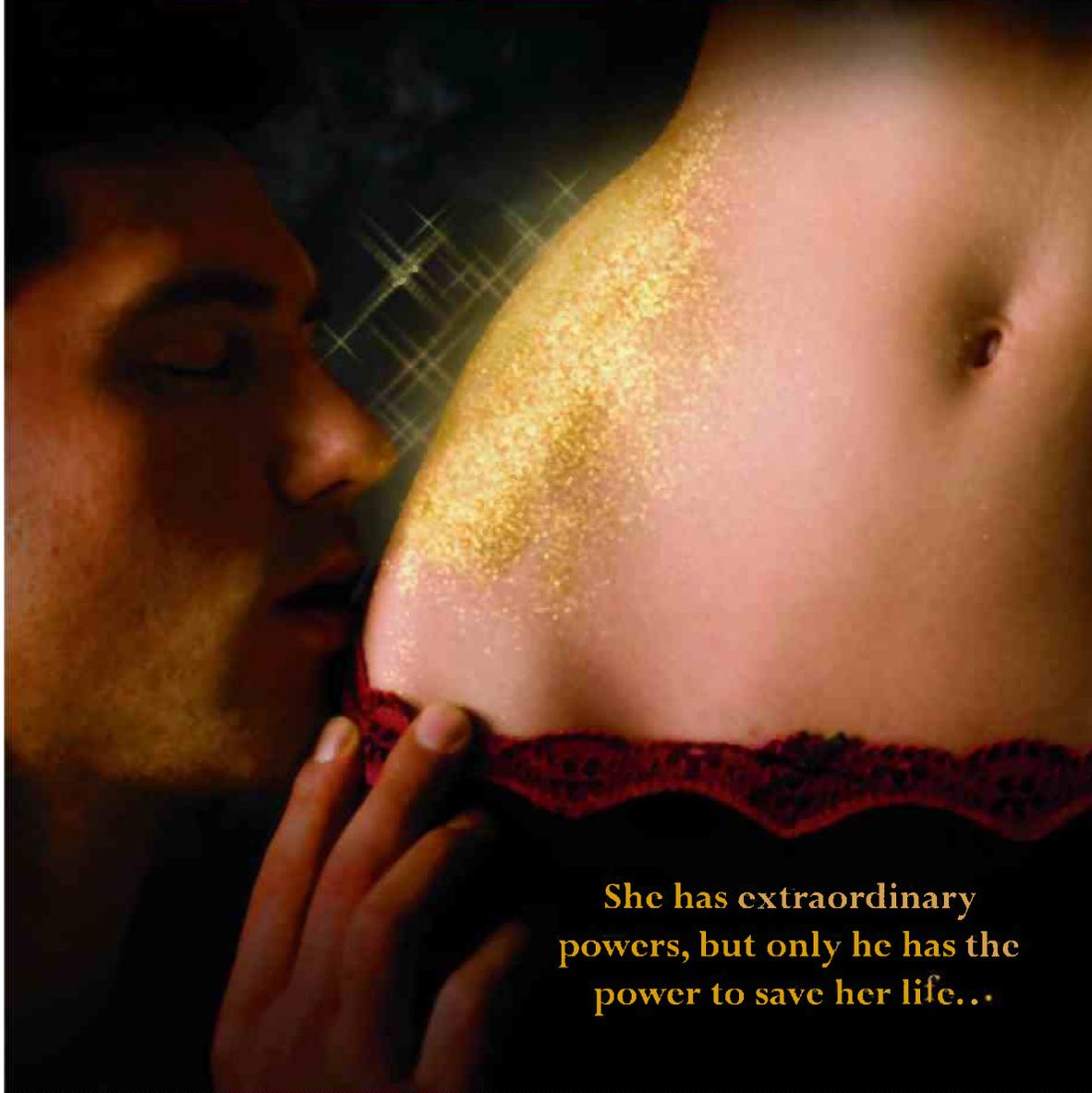


CARIDAD PIÑEIRO

USA Today Bestselling Author

SINS
OF THE
FLESH



She has extraordinary
powers, but only he has the
power to save her life...

Enjoy this Prequel from
SINS OF THE FLESH
by Caridad Pineiro
Available October 27, 2009
Forever from Grand Central Publishing

Caterina Shaw's days are numbered. Her only chance for survival is a highly experimental gene treatment – a risk she willingly takes. But now Caterina barely recognizes herself. She has new, terrifying powers, an exotic, arresting body — and she's been accused of a savage murder, sending her on the run.

Mick Carrera is a mercenary and an expert at capturing elusive, clever prey. Yet the woman he's hunting down is far from the vicious killer he's been told to expect: Caterina is wounded, vulnerable, and a startling mystery of medical science. Even more, she's a beautiful woman whose innocent sensuality tempts Mick to show her exactly how thrilling pleasure can be. The heat that builds between them is irresistible, but surrendering to it could kill them both . . . for a dangerous group is plotting its next move using Caterina as its deadly pawn.

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Atlantic City, New Jersey

Late Winter

He normally didn't take jobs involving kids. They were too troublesome a commodity, Mick Carrera thought.

But his sister Bobbie had asked for the help, making it almost impossible to say no. Especially since in a couple of days she was heading off for her second tour of duty in Iraq.

Mick wanted her safe and sound which meant he needed Bobbie free of worry about her friend's missing daughter. After obtaining information from Bobbie's friend on the custody agreement her ex had violated, he had started investigating the man.

In no time Mick had tracked the sleazeball to one of the casinos in Atlantic City's Marina area. Rumor had it that his target was holed up in a VIP suite where a very private, very high-stakes poker game was occurring. One where the stakes sometimes included young girls.

Although Mick held out hope that the deadbeat dad cared for his eleven year-old daughter enough not to turn her into the ante for a poker game, he had seen too much in his thirty-something years to rule it out.

Taking a sip of bottled water, he swept the binoculars in his hand across the length of the VIP suite across the way from his hotel room. He smiled as he took note of the room service wagons being wheeled into the space. When he had overheard one of the players placing the order earlier that night, he had managed to intercept the delivery and slip some bugs onto the service carts.

With room service in place, he engaged his laptop and tuned into the conversation in the room while continuing to observe the activity through his binoculars, vigilant for any sign of the missing girl. The child wasn't there, which brought both relief and worry.

Where had the deadbeat left his daughter?

The delivery of the food brought a break in the gambling, but less than half an hour later, the five men around the table were back at it.

Mick listened and watched as the men played. It became quickly apparent that his target was in over his head. He lost hand after hand, dropping thousands until he had no chips sitting in front of him and, apparently, no cash either.

"Seems you're out," one of the other gamblers said, his voice sandpaper gruff and brooking no disagreement. The gambler had a thick accent. Eastern European, Mick concluded.

"Actually, I have one more thing I think will interest you. I just need a moment to get her."

Grabbing his smartphone, Mick slipped in his earpiece and forwarded the audio feed from the bugs to the device. With a quick toggle of keys, he flipped over to the elevator bank controls he had hacked earlier. One elevator went to the floor for the suite and then headed for the ground floor.

Damn. With three towers joined together by an assortment of restaurants, shopping and gaming areas, he feared losing his target on the busy main level.

He raced out of his room and to the elevator, impatient as he waited for it to arrive and take him down. Once on the first

floor, he pushed forward through the crowd in the halls and the gaming areas. As Mick neared the central lobby, he noticed the deadbeat dad walking toward him. The man's steps were rushed and as he kept on looking behind him, as if he expected that someone would be following.

No one was. As Mick stepped aside to seemingly place a bet at one of the slots, his target scurried past.

Mick waited a beat and then followed, careful not to be seen. When he arrived at the elevators, his target had already entered along with an older couple. Mick sneaked in just as the doors were closing and turned his attention to his phone, making believe that he was texting while all the time keeping tabs on his target from the corner of his eye.

The man had his hands in his pockets and was jingling keys and some change. He tapped one foot constantly. A fine line of sweat gathered above his upper lip and the along the edge of his hairline, even though the air in the hotel was downright frosty.

When his mark got off the elevator, Mick delayed enough to make it seem as if he hadn't been paying attention. Then he hopped off in the opposite direction, still seemingly engrossed in his cell phone, while the man headed to the far end of the floor.

With only a quick glance down the hall, the man entered his room.

Mick rushed close and listened carefully. He heard some scuffled steps and crying from within. A louder slap carried through the glass by the front door and was followed by more intense sobs.

"Shut up you! Or I'll give a reason to cry!"

Mick's jaw tightened at the man's words. He rapped his knuckles forcefully against the door.

The door flew open to reveal the man holding the struggling young girl with one hand. The man's other hand was tucked behind his back in a too-familiar stance.

"Mark Smith?" Mick asked, but saw the tell-tale twitch in the man's arm.

With a lightning fast move Mick delivered a punch that knocked Smith away from the door. As Smith stumbled, the gun he had been holding behind his back clattered to the floor and he released the girl, who hurried away.

Mick hated the show of violence in front of the child, but Smith was not going down easily. The man lunged for him and Mick connected with another shot to Smith's face that had him falling to his knees. Despite being momentarily dazed, the man

was soon scrabbling on all fours toward the gun.

Mick kicked the gun away and then delivered a punishing knee to Smith's face that brought the sickening crunch of bone.

With that, the other man finally dropped unconscious to the ground. Quickly Mick pulled handcuffs from his jacket pocket as he closed the hotel room door and met the young girl's tearful wide-eyed gaze.

"I'm your mommy's friend," he said, worried that the girl would create a ruckus that would bring hotel security running.

Instead she came up to Mick as he kneeled by Smith's prone body to snap on the handcuffs. She encircled Mick's neck with her spindly arms. Cuddling close, the girl sighed peacefully and Mick had no choice but to awkwardly embrace her.

Damn and double-damn, he thought as he held the little girl close. Never take a job that involved a kid.

#

His sister Bobbie stood by him as he watched the reunion between mother and child.

The sound of a weepy snuffle came from beside him and he glanced at his sister as she wiped at her eyes. He hadn't figured Bobbie for the emotional type, but then again, even he

was feeling more than a scintilla of happiness.

"I have to go," he said gruffly and with a curt nod, extricated himself from the gathering. He had already left Bobbie's friend with the name of someone who could help her deal with her ex in the courts.

He rushed out the door, but Bobbie was immediately beside him.

"I appreciate what you did for my friend," she said as she zipped her leather jacket tight against the cold blustery wind outside.

Mick shrugged and said, "Just doing a job."

"Right. I forgot you're a big bad-ass gun for hire," she replied, but a teasing lilt colored her tones. Before he could say anything else, she said, "My going away party is on Saturday. Will you be there?"

Bobbie's going away party. Just a couple more days before she was off to war.

He glanced at his sister while they walked shoulder-to-shoulder.

"Maybe," he answered honestly. He was brave enough to face down most anything. Except his mother who would likely start in on him again about settling down and leaving his current

occupation.

Bobbie laughed loudly and playfully nudged him with her shoulder. "You're afraid of *mami*? You are so not a bad ass."

He slipped his arm around Bobbie's shoulders and gave an affectionate hug. His little sister might be nearly as tall as he was and probably as tough, but he still worried about her.

"I'll try to be there," he replied as they paused at the corner to allow a car to go by on the nearly deserted avenue, then crossed over to the boardwalk and strolled to the metal railings separating the walk from the beach. The wind was even stronger here, angrily whipping the dried stalks of dune grasses and occasionally tossing sand up while they stood there, staring out onto white-capped waves.

Bobbie turned to lean back on the railing and faced him. "You should visit the family more often. They miss you."

He missed them as well, only . . . There was still too much he had to do and too many wrongs to right.

"I'll try," he said, but then a second later his cell phone rang.

He glanced down at the caller ID. Wardwell Laboratories. It was the second time today that they had phoned and he wondered what they could want with him. He hadn't done

corporate security in quite some time.

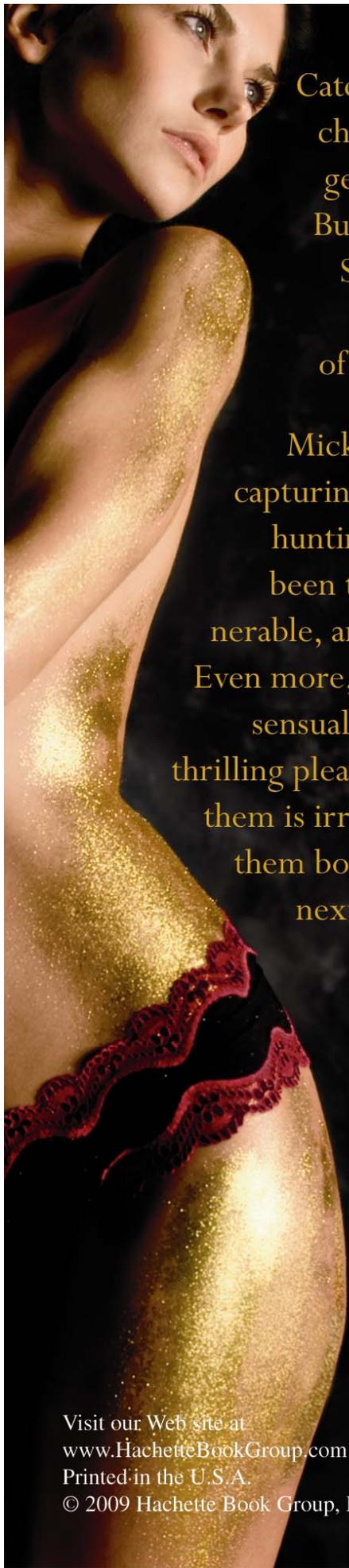
Bobbie asked, "Do you need me to go so you can take that?"

Mick shook his head and snapped the phone shut, ignoring the summons, although he knew Bobbie would understand if he had decided to take the call. Out of all of his family, Bobbie was the one most like him. Or maybe it was better to say most like the old him. The man who had once understood the meaning of honor and duty.

The new him was a different creature and not above bending the rules to finish a job that he had been paid to do. But as he met Bobbie's gaze, he realized she still saw him as a hero. A heavy burden to bear and one which he wasn't sure he could shoulder.

"Be safe," he said and hugged her, harder than before.

It was his way of saying goodbye before he walked off alone into the cold winter day.



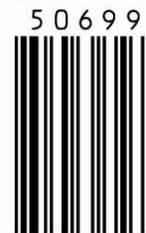
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